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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of the investigation discussed in this paper is to determine the perceived effectiveness of a life skills education program for youth. During an eight-week summer day camp program, youth in grades kindergarten through fifth participated in 28 hours of life skills education focusing on relating and caring. Fifteen skills were assessed. Data were collected from 18 youth participants, 13 parents, and 13 classroom teachers. Youth participants responded to questions about their perception of improvements in 15 specific life skill areas. Parents responded to questions concerning their perceptions of the effectiveness of the life skills education program in teaching their children the same 15 skills. As a follow-up, classroom teachers rated the abilities of those students in each of the 15 life skills. Results indicate that all students felt they had improved in most of the skill areas. Parents perceived the program to be effective in teaching the 15 life skills to their children. Classroom teachers reported that the children participating in the summer day camp program performed above average in 12 of the 15 skill areas. (Author/MKA)

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Lifeskills Education:
Perceived Effectiveness of a 4-H Out-of-School Program

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this investigation was to determine the perceived effectiveness of a life skills education program for youth. During an eight-week summer day camp program, youth in grades Kindergarten through fifth participated in twenty-eight hours of life skills education focusing on relating and caring. Fifteen skills were assessed.

Data were collected from eighteen youth participants, thirteen parents, and thirteen classroom teachers. Youth participants responded to questions about their perception of improvements in fifteen specific life skill areas. Parents responded to questions concerning their perceptions of the effectiveness of the life skills education program in teaching their children the same fifteen skills. As a follow-up, classroom teachers rated the abilities of these students in each of the fifteen life skills.

Results indicated that all students felt they had improved in most of the skill areas. Parents perceived the program to be effective in teaching the fifteen skills to their children. Classroom teachers reported that the children participating in the summer day camp program performed above average in twelve of the fifteen skill areas.

INTRODUCTION

Where do America's children go when school is out? Some go home where parents wait to provide care and supervision. Others stay with relatives or responsible adults. Some go home alone with no adult supervision. A growing number participate in before-school, after-school, and summer day camp programs. Out-of-school time is a complex construct that influences the lives of children in many ways.

Youth development programs serving school-age children before- and after-school, on teacher workdays, during holidays, and throughout the summer months cannot only provide a safe environment, but can also provide invaluable learning experiences. Miller (1995) agrees:

> Out of school time represents an important opportunity to increase the potential for success in children's lives. Skills may be enhanced in enrichment activities, which often also contributes to children's problem-solving abilities and the development of lifelong interests. Out-of school time may provide opportunities for children to interact with peers in a variety of settings, thereby promoting social skills and long-term friendships. . . children may develop significant, enduring relationships with caring adults while at the same time having experiences that build self-esteem (7).

Much of the research on the positive impacts of out-of-school programs, point to the importance of supervised care in keeping adolescents from engaging in high risk behaviors. Existing research often focuses on the relationships between out-of-school experiences and school achievement. Little emphasis has been placed on ways in which out-of-school time can be optimized for successful development.

The research that has been done relative to school-age care often focuses on after-school programs alone. Out-of-school periods, such as before-school hours and school vacations, have rarely been studied. Much research remains to be done concerning the effects of out-of-school programs for youth.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many children live in complicated, stressful, and even dangerous situations. Rates of violence experienced by children - in both their homes and their neighborhoods – have dramatically increased. A growth in the complexity of the family structure – especially single-parent and blended families – has further complicated the lives of America's children. In addition, the ability of many families to give their children time, supervision, and attention is decreasing" (Miller, 1995). Statistics on family change speak to the increasing needs of children facing the stresses of violence, lack of time with caring adults, and poverty.

One need that many children have is for supervised out-of-school care. This need is particularly acute during the summer months. Little is known about where school-age children spend their summer vacation time. Research results vary widely. One study found that almost half of the children studied participated in a supervised program. Another study indicated that less than 10 percent of children spent any time in a supervised program (including recreation programs and summer camp). Younger children were more likely to be in a supervised before or after school program than older children. "Low-income families (<$15,000 per year) and families with mothers that did not complete her high school education are less likely to enroll their children in center-based care. Lack of subsidies may be a contributing factor. Most school-age programs derive an average of 83% of their income from parent fees and 86% pay full tuition" (Miller, 1995).

Lack of subsidies, lack of space in child care programs, and lack of a family support system can result in children having to stay home alone. Self-care is the term used to describe youth who do not have supervised care during out-of-school time. Self-care does have its disadvantages. The amount of risky behaviors in which youth participate seems to increase as the age of the child in self-care decreases. Child safety can be a grave concern when school-age youth are unsupervised.. To keep these self-care children safe, parents encourage them to stay home totally alone during after-school hours. This strategy may have negative impacts on development however. Limited social contact can impact social development. Developing poor peer relationships may be considered a risk factor for developmental problems. Children who have poor peer relations tend to be more disruptive and are more likely drop out of school than those who are liked by their peers.

Although few research studies have indicated significant differences in social functioning between children in self-care and children in supervised care, several point to the importance of

social interactions on development. Belle and Burr (1989) found that children who have social interactions during out of school time appear to be happier and better adjusted than those who do not. Miller (1995) writes that peer relations are important to numerous areas of development, including social perspective taking, moral judgment, linguistic skills, self-concept, and the sense of social support and security. Developing the ability to build positive peer relationships can be critical to a child's future. Some educators propose that "children's social skills are a better indicator of adult success than school grades or classroom behavior." (Hartup, n.d.) Posner and Vandell (1994) found that youth attending after school programs had better peer relations and were rated as having better emotional adjustment than other groups of children. The program studied was specifically designed for school-age youth and youth participated in academic activities, enrichment lessons, and supervised play.

Providing youth opportunities to develop skills and engage in other developmental processes associated with peer interaction should be a component of all out-of-school child care programs. Supervised out-of-school care can have positive effects on student achievement and peer relations. In addition, reducing the number of risky behaviors can positively impact the lives of children. Well-planned and developmentally appropriate after school programs that include academic activities, enrichment lessons, supervised play, and life skills education can improve development and provide a benefit to society.

METHOD OF THE STUDY

> The goal of youth programming is to provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for young people to experience life skills, to practice them until they are learned, and be able to use them as necessary throughout a lifetime. Through the experiential learning process, youth internalize the knowledge and gain the ability to apply the skills appropriately."
>
> (Hendricks, 1998)

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceived effectiveness of a life skills education program for school-age youth. Describing the concept of life skills, defining the 4-H program, and explaining the Targeting Life Skills Model are critical to understanding the program. Hendricks (1998) writes that defining life skill concepts is important because those who develop and implement curriculum and programs should have the same understanding of the terms.

A skill is a learned ability. Life skills are abilities individuals can learn that will help them live a successful, productive and satisfying life. Life skills prepare people to cope with whatever life brings; help people lead successful lives; and are useful long afterwards in other life situations. One youth organization that incorporates teaching life skills in its educational activities is 4-H.

4-H is a youth program for young people ages 5 to 19. The goal of 4-H is to develop all youth to reach their fullest potential through: developing life skills; learning by doing (hands-on learning); and utilizing the knowledge of the land-grant university system. 4-H enables youth to have fun, meet new people, learn new life skills, build self-confidence, learn responsibility, and set and achieve goals. 4-H offers such a wide range of projects, programs and activities that every member can do well in 4-H. Parents, volunteers, community leaders, and Extension staff share their time and talents with 4-H youth. The four H's of 4-H represent: head, heart, hands, and health (National 4-H Council, 1999).

4-H educational experiences are built around life skills that center on positive self esteem, communication, and decision making. Citizenship and leadership skills, learning how to learn, and the ability to cope with change also are an important part of 4-H educational programs. The program also incorporates life skills development into an expanding number of delivery modes. In addition to the core 4-H community club model, youth may participate through urban groups, community resource development, special interest groups, school enrichment, camping, interagency learning experiences and school-age child care programs. The program in this study

was a part of a 4-H school-age care project. The model for teaching life skills adopted by the state 4-H department was developed by Patricia Hendricks, Ph.D. from Iowa Cooperative Extension.

In the Targeting Life Skills (TLS) Model categories of life skills are identified on the basis of Head, Heart, Hands, and Health. Under each of these four headings, there are two general categories of skills. Within each general category there are a series of more specific skills. The TLS Model provides a way to coordinate life skill development with ages and stages tasks. By using developmentally appropriate tasks to teach specific life skills, the TLS Model should be effective in achieving identified outcomes in youth development. When integrated into the curriculum, life skills determine how the subject matter content is taught and practiced.

> Then the life skill is used to help determine how the subject matter content is delivered and to identify which observable/measurable indicators (attitudes or behaviors) would demonstrate that youth program planners were successful in bringing about change in learners. Narrowing the life skill brings focus to writing objectives that describe impacts."
>
> (Hendricks, 1998)

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

4-H Summer Opportunities for Advancement, Remediation, and Socialization (4-H SOARS) is the 4-H summer day camp program. 4-H SOARS is one component of the 4-H program in an economically deprived rural mountain county in North Carolina. The county has approximately 700 students in grades Kindergarten through five. Forty-five of these students attended the 4-H SOARS program during the summer of 1999.

4-H SOARS was an eight-week, full-day summer camp for youth in grades K-5. The typical day included enrichment activities, limited academic activities, supervised play, swimming, and life skills activities. Life skills, called "good citizen" activities, were added to the curriculum in 1999. At the end of the summer program the previous year, youth participated in an exit interview which included the completion of a questionnaire. One of the questions on the that instrument was: "What is the biggest problem facing the people of Graham County?". This question was open-ended and campers could respond in any manner they chose. Ten percent of those surveyed indicated that "getting along in the family" was a problem. Follow-up questions uncovered concerns about: parent-parent arguments, parent-child arguments, family violence, and

alcohol/drug issues within the family. Based upon the results of these exit interviews, adding a component to help young people improve family relationships, communication skills, and conflict resolution skills was deemed warranted by the program director. After referring to the Targeting Life Skill Model (TLC),the emphasis was placed on the "Heart" category skills of relating and caring.

For the 1999 summer day camp program, a school psychologist was employed to create lessons and lead life skill activities four days each week. The psychologist worked with several small groups of children, usually 8 to 15 per group, for one hour each day. Activities primarily focused on four major areas: social skills/friendship, family life/nurturing relationships, teamwork/cooperation, and caring for other people. In addition to the psychologist, one adult group leader, and one teen leader observed the activities. The psychologist provided instruction, lead group discussions, and provided opportunities for guided practice. The adult group leader and teen leader could reinforce concepts taught and practiced in the life skill class in real life situations throughout the day.

The 4-H summer day camp program was open to all youth in grades K-5. Forty-five youth attended the program. The youth interviewed attended this program for at least seventy-five percent of the time. Parents used in this study were parents of 4-H SOARS participants. Teachers participating in this study are the classroom teachers of 4-H SOARS participants in the school year following the completion of the summer program.

DATA COLLECTION

It is difficult to establish criteria for evaluating life skills. When using self-reporting or recall with youth in elementary school, more than one method of collecting data should be used. Including qualitative, open-ended questions that allow the learner more freedom to express personal thoughts, feelings, concerns and values is appropriate (Hendricks, 1998).

For the first phase of the study, three examples of moral and relational dilemmas were selected. Topics of the dilemmas dealt with honesty, trustworthiness, and friendship. The psychologist would describe each scenario and ask the youth respondent what the children in the scenario could do in the situation. The researcher repeated the question until the child could no

longer describe alternative behaviors. The number of alternative behaviors and a brief description of each alternative was recorded for comparison. This process was repeated during the final week of the summer program to determine if any changes in responses had occurred. The scenario pre-test/post-test was completed with twenty-four children. The number of alternatives given and the quality of response remained constant from the pre-test to the post-test.

The second phase of the study involved ascertaining the perceptions of youth participants and parents as to the effectiveness of the life skills classes. Surveys were completed by youth participants and parents.

The youth questionnaire consisted of two open-ended questions related to the life skills program and fifteen questions where respondents rated themselves as to improvement in the fifteen skill areas. The fifteen skill areas are: talking with other people, listening to other people, working as a team member, being a good sport, making friends, playing with other children, getting along with other children, caring for other people, sharing toys, being kind to other people, understanding other people's feelings, getting along as a member of your family, being part of the family team, being a good sport, and feeling good about yourself. An interviewer asked the questions and recorded responses.

Parents rated the effectiveness of the program in teaching the fifteen skills to their child/children on a five point Likert scale. Ratings selections were: Not Effective; Somewhat Effective; Effective; Very Effective; and Extremely Effective. Parents were also asked to describe any changes in behavior in their child relative to the life skills.

The third phase of the study focused on identifying the skill levels of participants. After the first semester of school ended, classroom teachers were asked to complete questionnaires about the skill level of former 4-H SOARS participants placed in their classroom following the summer program. Teachers rated the abilities of each child on a five point Likert scale. There were six possible responses: Unsatisfactory, Below Average, Average, Above Average, Superior and Don't Know/Not Observed. Teachers were also asked to describe any behaviors they had observed in their student relative to the life skills.

There was low attendance on the day exit interviews were completed with campers and surveys distributed to parents. At this same time, parents were asked to sign release forms allowing teachers to share information. Follow-ups with parents were done to increase participation, but the

return rate was small. Eighteen youth were interviewed as to their perceptions of and experiences in the program. This was a forty percent response rate. Thirteen parents or thirty-four percent completed surveys. Thirteen classroom teachers, thirty percent, responded to requests for feedback.

RESULTS

The hypothesis for the scenario test was that participants in the life skills classes would be able to identify more behavioral alternatives after having been exposed to a variety of problem-solving perspectives during group discussions and guided practice. This hypothesis was rejected. No differences in the number of behavioral alternatives given nor differences in quality of responses were recorded. Both remained constant.

The survey results from youth participants, parents and classroom teachers are shown in Table 1. Positive results were reported by each group.

Twelve to fifteen of the eighteen campers responding reported improvements on each of the life skills. Eighty-three percent reported that their skills had improved in: getting along with other children; caring for other people, and being kind to other people. Seventy-seven percent reported improvements in: working as a team member, making friends, getting along as a member of the family, being part of the family team, being a good friend, and feeling good about yourself. When asked what they learned in the "Good Citizen" activities, sixty-five percent of the campers responded with one or more of the following: fairness, teamwork, manners, being nice, kindness, sharing, respect, concern for others feelings, sportsmanship, honesty, and the "golden rule". Some examples were:

> *"How to respect and care about people and how it isn't fair to do what you want without thinking about other people."*
>
> *"Be nice to other people. I was shy at first, but got over it and started talking."*

Table 1

Survey results on the perceived effectiveness of the 4-H life skills education program and the skill level of youth participants as identified by classroom teachers.

	Youth Percentage Reporting Skill Improvement (N=18)	Parents Average Rating of Program Effectiveness (N=13)	Teachers Average Rating of Youth Ability (N=13)
Talking with other people	72%	3.77	3.62
Listening to other people	66%	3.83	3.62
Working as a team member	78%	3.72	3.69
Being a good sport	66%	4.00	3.69
Making friends	78%	3.92	3.69
Playing with other children	72%	3.92	3.62
Getting along with other children	83%	3.92	3.38
Caring for other people	83%	3.92	3.92
Sharing Toys	72%	3.77	4.00
Being kind to other people	83%	4.00	3.54
Understanding other people's feelings	72%	3.85	3.23
Getting along as member of family	78%	3.85	3.67
Being part of the family team	78%	3.85	3.78
Being a good friend	78%	4.00	3.36
Feeling good about yourself/themselves	78%	4.08	3.62

Parents report the life skills program to be effective in teaching all the life skills. In four areas parents rated the program very effective: being a good sport, being kind to other people, being a good friend, and feeling good about themselves. Some behaviors observed by parents were:

"Tends to be more considerate about other people's feelings".
"She is more constructive with her time – has become more courteous".
"Much more caring of other people's feelings."
"Increased ability to work with others."
"She takes defeat a lot better, actually accepts it now. This is a great change for her."
"She is more sensitive to the feelings of others. Considering how they might feel before she does something, or asking someone else what they would like as opposed to making the choice by herself."

Teachers rated ability levels in all fifteen life skills as average (3.00) to above average (4.00). The highest ability levels reported were for sharing toys and caring for other people.

In comparing results from all three groups, positive perceptions of the program and the abilities of the children were reported. Interestingly, a slight difference occurs in one life skill. Fewer youth reported improvement in "being a good sport", while parents felt the program had done a very effective job in teaching this life skill.

There is agreement in at least one skill area. All three groups mentioned "caring for other people" as a skill learned and observed. This life skill is greatly valued in the community in which these children live. In addition to benefiting youth and families, the perception that the 4-H life skills program teaches "caring for others" could be beneficial for the programs' reputation within the community. These results infer that the 4-H life skills program attained its goal.

DISCUSSION

The goal for the life skills program was to help youth develop skills that could help them cope with family problems. The emphasis the program took was on teaching children how to relate to and care for others. The results seem to indicate the program was successful in teaching some life skills. Unfortunately, the low response rates in all groups prohibits any definite conclusions.

Further study of the effectiveness of out-of-school programs in teaching life skills to youth is needed. Particular emphasis should be placed on identifying the most appropriate teaching methodologies. Researchers should consider studies that investigate changes in skill levels, skill usage in a variety of environments, and skill development over time.

Most research about out-of-school programs focus on the effects of child care on student achievement. This may not be the biggest benefit such programs provide. Before-school, after-school, teacher-workday, and summer programs are often considered to have positive impacts on peer relations. These effects typically occur as a result of increased peer interactions. Perhaps these impacts could be even more substantial if educators in these programs took a proactive approach to teaching life skills during out-of-school time. The first step should be identifying the specific life skills needed by participants attending the out-of-school program. Youth advocates should view out-of-school time not as a baby-sitting service, but as another venue in which to positively impact children's lives.

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